DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 049 968 SO 001 004

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TITLE Anthropology and the Teaching of Afro-American Studies.
PUB DATE 3 Apr 71
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference, Southern Anthropological Society, Dallas, Texas, April 3, 1971

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *African American Studies, *Anthropology, Black Community, Course Objectives, *Cross Cultural Studies, Curriculum Development, *Ethnology, Higher Education, *Negro Culture, Negro History

ABSTRACT

Courses on New World Negro societies and communities are, of course, just as valuable in illustrating anthropological concepts as are area courses surveying North American Indians, but anthropology departments have been reluctant to introduce these courses. Afro-American studies could be a valuable extension of anthropology offerings by: 1) helping to avoid the bias against studying societies which are culturally close to home; 2) encouraging the recently developed interest in urban anthropology; 3) affording an opportunity for meaningful field work experience in nearby ethnic communities; and, 4) providing an opportunity to study a culturally similar community so that we learn more about ourselves as anthropologists. Anthropology could contribute significantly to the students' understanding of Afro-American studies as well. Perhaps the most valuable contribution is its cross-cultural perspective. Another would be a more sophisticated understanding of the concept of culture, so that a better definition of "black culture" could emerge. An Afro-American anthropology course which doesn't pander to emotional political needs can result in giving black students a sense of pride in their race, and also enable white students to recognize the prevalence of institutionalized racism in this country. Both blacks and whites have a role in teaching Afro-American anthropology. (Author/JLB)

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ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE TEACHING OF AFRO-AMERICAN STUDIES

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Paper to be presented at the Annual Meeting
of the Southern Anthropological Society,
Dallas, Texas, April 3, 1971

SO 001 004

The cultural behavior of Afro-Americans is not a new subject of study to cultural anthropologists, and Africa has been for many years one of the favorite locations for ethnographic field work, yet undergraduate students today seeking relevant information in the area they refer to as "black studies" are not likely to consider anthropology to be one of their most valuable sources. Because historians and sociologists have played a more active role in establishing Afro-American studies programs in liberal arts college curriculums, they are apt to be seen by their students as better informed and more concerned in this area than are anthropologists.

Certainly not all historians and sociologists see sufficient academic justification in their colleagues' proposals for courses in Afro-American studies. Some have been heard to ask facetiously, "Why not Italian-American studies?" It is clear, of course, that Americans with Italian ancestors are not handicapped in this society by a lack of knowledge of their own ethnic history, nor are other Americans seriously deficient in their ability to interact with Italian-Americans, because they are ignorant of what it means to be descended from Italian grandparents. Americans of Italian descent learn something about Italy in World History, and the significant contributions of European immigrants and their descendents in this country are stressed in American history courses. Some faculty members concerned with curriculum revisions have come to accept courses in Afro-American studies on a temporary basis. They suggest that, ideally, "black history" and "black literature"

should be absorbed into standard courses in American history and literature. But what of black anthropology? I have not heard any serious suggestion that a course in African ethnography should be granted only a temporary existence.

It is not my purpose here to attempt to justify Afro-American studies programs or majors. My intention is more specific. I wish to suggest two ideas for your consideration. The first concerns what Afro-American studies can contribute to the teaching of anthropology. The second, suggesting a symbiotic relationship, concerns how the discipline of anthropology might benefit Afro-American studies.

The only anthropologist frequently referred to by black students today is Melville Herskovits. In support of their claims concerning the prevalence of African cultural survivals in the United States, they rely heavily on The Myth of the Negro Past, first published in 1941. Anthropologists, working in Afro-American communities in this country today, find little to support the Herskovits thesis; they generally conclude that, at best, Herskovits greatly overstated the frequency and extent of such survivals. Even field workers in the Caribbean, where it is far easier to document African survivals, tend to be critical of his tendency to see every parallel as a syncretism, reinterpretation, or survival of a West African trait. Certainly the current findings of these anthropologists are less immediately appealing to Afro-Americans actively seeking symbols of black identity; yet these same findings are relevant to any student wishing to understand

the nature of the Afro-American experience in the United States.

Courses in Afro-American anthropology are found under various titles: The Peoples of Sub-Saharan Africa, Caribbean Societies and Cultures, The Negro in the New World, Afro-American Ethnohistory, etc.--but they are not found often. Although hundreds of colleges and universities in the past few years have introduced courses in the history of Afro-Americans (Franklin, 1970), anthropology departments have shown a reluctance to follow this example. Perhaps, because we have not been subjected to the same intensity of urgings from our students for courses which focus on black Americans, we have found it easier to discredit courses which evolve from such a source. This is ironical, if true, because the interests of anthropologists have often been directly influenced by contemporary public opinion and politican concerns (Keiser, 1970b). So why have we been so relatively inactive in teaching Afro-American studies in recent years? Anthropologists are well equipped to prepare themselves to teach courses in this area; they have a wealth of ethnographic studies of high quality to draw on, and yet they are too often unwilling to get involved in Afro-American studies programs in spite of the fact they they could offer to such programs just what they feel is lacking: cultural relativity. They see too many black history courses as beeing nothing more than a glorifying of notable Negroes. They see courses offered by other departments as being little more than therapy sessions

for teachers and students alike. Some Afro-American studies courses offered under the guise of social science seem to openly discourage objectivity and to measure a student's success in class by the extent of his revolutionary zeal. If Afro-American studies are in such a state on some campuses, is this necessarily a permanent condition? The fact that "Latin American Studies and Soviet Studies developed in North American universities partly in response to political events" (Mintz, 1970a) did not prevent them from evolving into academically sound areas of study.

Courses on New World Negro societies and communities are, of course, just as valuable in illustrating anthropological concepts as are area courses surveying the Indians of North America or societies of Southeast Asia. But Afro-American ethnology courses have the added advantage of active student interest. Such interest may be generated in a course on Latin America or the island peoples of the Pacific, but in a course on Afro-Americans, student interest is evident at the outset and can be effectively taken advantage of by bold and innovative teaching. Because many students, white and black, already accept the relevancy of Afro-American studies, and because they are relatively familiar with the subject matter, the resulting active and concerned class discussions and the challenging questioning of assigned reading and lecture materials offer us decided advantages for creative teaching and learning. It may not make for the kind of comfortable teaching which may be enjoyed by some

of our colleagues who conduct classes in non-controversial areas such as linguistics or archaeology, but such comfort at the college level aids neither teaching nor learning. Afro-American anthropology is conducive to stimulating students and professors in ways that might be extremely beneficial to them both.

Anthropologists have been generally biased against studying societies which are culturally too close to home; or at least, they have shown a strong preference for doing field work in non-Western societies (Mintz, 1970b). A course on Afro-American ethnography could help students to avoid this limiting bias. Such courses would also encourage the recently developed interest in urban anthropology, an area traditionally neglected by ethnologists. Even undergraduates can be given a taste of field work experience in near-by communities, if they are not prejudiced against participant-observing Western urban man. Even those students who have been sent into local communities to study ethnic patterns of behavior have often been led to conclude that "real" anthropologists study exotic peoples. They have been encouraged to feel that their experience in the ghetto or the suburb is merely an exercise and nothing of significance is expected from their efforts. Consequently, we have failed to take full advantage of the opportunity afforded by ethnic communities in the vicinity of our campuses to expose all of our majors to meaningful field work experience.

Only in recent years have anthropologists begun to

study northern urban Negro communities. A symposium on the New World Negro, held at the American Anthropological Association meeting in 1967, did not include any papers on urban Afro-Americans, yet it may deserve credit for encouraging such studies. Since that time we have seen the publication of several works resulting from field work in northern cities: an excellent study of a ghetto neighborhood in Washington, D.C., by Ulf Hannerz, a Swedish anthropologist (1970), Lincoln Keiser's monograph on a black street gang in Chicago (1969), and the collection of reports on recent research in Afro-American anthropology edited by Norman Whitten and John Szwed (1970), which included six articles based on studies of urban Negroes. Although most Afro-Americans in the western hemisphere live outside the United States, understanding urban dwelling Afro-Americans in this country holds a special signigicance for us as scholars and citizens. To understand this country today, it is just as necessary for us to be familiar with the present patterns of behavior of Negroes in the United States, most of whom are urban, as it is for historians to understand the past behavior of Negroes in order to record American history accurately.

By failing to study urban Negroes in the United States, those most likely to closely resemble the field worker, we have not taken full advantage of an opportunity to learn something about ourselves as anthropologists. How objective are we really capable of being? How confident are we when reporting about a subject with which our audience is somewhat

familiar? How competent are we in studying people who fully understand the social implications of what we write about them? Charles Valentine (1967) made reference to some of the difficulties suggested by these questions when he critized anthropologists for failing to recognize the significance of white domination of Negro communities. Because ethnographers, following the example of Malinowski, have stressed the functional interdependencies of the institutions of an ethnic community rather than the interdependencies among people in a region (LeVine, 1970), many continued this practice in their work on the New World Negro, failing to examine fully the oppressive influence of whites.

When students study any ethnography, they should learn from it more about the latent dynamics of their own culture. That is the first step toward becoming an anthropologist. When white students study about black communities in an anthropology course, they are given an opportunity to learn what is central to any ethnology course: the opportunity to study the behavior of people whose collective experience is significantly different from their own. By introducing them to communities such as "Soulside" (Hannerz, 1970) and "Georgiatown" (Young, 1970), to "Tally's Corner" (Liebow, 1967) and "Cottonville" (Powdermaker, 1968), it is possible to illustrate those anthropological concepts that area ethnography courses have been traditionally used for, concepts related to cultural relativity and variability. In addition to this, such a course would have a special advantage in giving stu-

dents--not just white students--extremely valuable insights into the makeup of their own society.

This can be illustrated with the parallel experience of those historians who have, for the first time, recently offered courses in Afro-American history. Such courses forced teachers and students to recognize the historical significance of racial ethnocentrism in the United States, encouraging them also to conclude that a standard course in American history which does not deal with racism fails to explain adequately the historical causality of many important events and developments in this country. The study of Afro-Americans cannot legitimately avoid examining their relationship to white Americans, and without an understanding of the nature of ethnic relations between blacks and whites, students could not be expected to view their own society with a sufficient degree of objectivity and understanding.

Many anthropologists have been concerned about what they might call a missionary mentality of many Afro-American courses in sociology, political science, history, and literature, and I would like to see this concern mature into action. Since Franz Boaz insisted that any causal relationship between race and social behavior was insignificant if not nonexistent, others who followed him have continued to combat the ever-popular beliefs that the Negro's assumed tendency to commit crimes of violence and his ability to play superior basketball are dependent on genetically inheritable traits. Students in many Afro-American studies courses today are being encouraged

to counter some of these old myths, but this is sometimes being done by the substitution of <u>new</u> myths. When an Afro-American history course is concerned more with meeting the immediate emotional needs of the student than with his intellectual needs, lectures may be designed merely to elicit favorable response from the members of the class, and endorsing the myths of the black militant is a reliable way to do this in some classes. Teachers are sometimes so afraid of offending militant students that their political views override academic considerations when they compile their syllabus. There are ready rationalizations for this tactic: that glorifying the past deeds of black Americans compensates for their long neglect by white historians; that propagandizing gives a sense of security to black students who have been abused by their previous educational experience; that emphasizing only what is good in blacks and only what is evil in whites will counteract the sense of superiority that society has given to white students. Their motives may be honorable, but I suggest that their methods are self-defeating. Propaganda is too easily recognized as such by students who do not have a vested interest in believing it, and students who accept it only because of emotional needs are being given a false sense of security at best, which can be readily destroyed by subsequent experience.

Afro-American anthropology courses could avoid some of these problems by pointing out that, for example, the black experience in American did not always involve constant rebel-

lion, nor did it consist of total passivity. It was, rather, a "process of resistance and accomodation" (Mintz, 1970a). The new myth of constant rebellion is no more academically respectable than the old stereotype of the passive slave. Each has its appeal to different people. The Sambo concept enabled whites to believe that Negroes were happy being dependent on and subservient to whites. Projecting black nationalism into the personality of Nat Turner, so that he becomes a sophisticated political revolutionary in the minds of students in need of a virile male folk hero, is equally dishonest and it is unnecessary dishonesty.

A course in Afro-American anthropology can also result in giving black students a sense of pride in their race and, at the same time, enable white students to recognize the prevalence of institutionalized racism in this country. Accomplishing these goals would not be dependent upon their being the primary concerns of the course. They would be a logical consequence of examining the African background, the slavery experience, the development of Negro music and folklore, the Negro family and the Negro church--in short, by studying the development and present state of the Afro-American community in the New World. Nothing in this material needs to be hidden or distorted to make it possible for black students to take for granted their own ethnic identity; nor is there anything there, objectively viewed, which encourages white students to maintain any sense of superiority. Given the significant accomplishments of Afro-Americans, especially in the

face of extremely adverse conditions, there is no need for exaggeration and myth-making in the classroom. The quilombos which evolved from successful slave insurrections in Brazil (Ramos, 1951), the unconquered tribes of Bush Negroes in Surinam, and the fiercely independent Trelawny Maroons of Jamaica (Robinson, 1969), are all part of the heritage of the Afro-American. Knowledge of the political and military successes of these groups can effectively destroy any vestige of the myth concerning the passive nature of the African slave. It also prepares firmer ground for an accurate explanation of the relative lack of successful slave rebellions in the southern United States.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution anthropology has to offer Afro-American studies is its cross-cultural perspective. Many sociologists have been criticized for their tendency to employ a social deviance or social disorganization model when examining an Afro-American community. This has led them to view the Negro lower-class family as an institution which evolved from unsuccessful attempts to conform to white middle-class norms. However, when investigations of Afro-American families are based on direct observation and a cross-cultural perspective, stressing the significance of functional adaptation, their conclusions are apt to be not only inoffensive to black students, but far more convincing and academically valuable to all students. Field workers such as Nancie Gonzalez (1969), Virginia Young (1970), and Ulf Hannerz (1967, 1970) have provided us with suitable

examples. Students who are interested in directed social change in Afro-American communities will find that data gathered in this way lends itself to practical application; this information can be used as a basis for programs designed to bring about institutional change. The failure of those social change programs based on sociological studies lacking any cross-cultural perspective indicates that such studies have offered us a distorted view of the Afro-American community.

One subject that is being given a great deal of attention by social scientists is "black culture." The essay by Robert Blauner (1970), which was mysteriously included in the recent volume of articles entitled Afro-American Anthropology, is one example of the confidence with which some sociologists use this term. Without adequately defining culture in this context, "black culture" does have an appeal. Like the terms "the culture of poverty" (Lewis, 1966; Parker and Kleiner, 1970) and "cultural pluralism" (Smith, 1965; Cross, 1968), it seems to suggest explanations even before sufficient data has been collected. The concept of "black culture" raises many questions about which anthropologists have long been concerned (Johnson and Sanday, 1971; Whitten and Szwed, 1968). Certainly, as students of culture, they ought to play a significant role in this continuing debate.

Sociologists like Robert Blauner (1970), who is white, and Nathan Hare, the publisher of The Black Scholar, seem to offer us a black mystique. Perhaps they wish to compensate for the embarrassment resulting from their students' reactions

to their colleague, Daniel Moynihan (1965). In asking anthropologists to offer courses on Afro-American anthropology, it is hoped that they would avoid over-reacting to the views of other social scientists or to the views of their students. However, they must be responsive to these views. Such courses might not enjoy the notoriety of the more politically oriented black studies offerings, and they will probably offend those students who find objectivity distasteful when discussing vital subjects such as black identity and white racism. But anyone who is afraid of offending with ideas would probably not become an anthropologist and would surely not enjoy teaching anthropology.

A recurrent question which arises, "Who will teach these courses in Afro-American anthropology?" deserves an answer. The question is likely to be based on the fact that there is not a sufficient number of black anthropologists who are available for teaching such courses. If you agree with some directors of Afro-American studies programs that whites have no qualifications for teaching black studies, and this is the reason that you are not offering such a course, then you have very nearly let yourself off the hook. However, any teacher who accepts this anti-intellectualist claim is severely handicapped in teaching any ethnology course. So long as the myth of the insider's exclusive insights goes unchallenged, anthropology students will be discouraged from the serious study of Afro-Americans or any other people, in spite of the fact that one of the first things they learn in

their introductory anthropology course is that there are decided advantages in the degree of objectivity one has when he studies people whose culture is unrelated to his own. It is significant that black scholars such as E. Franklin Frazier, John Hope Franklin, and Kenneth Clark have contributed immensely to our understanding of Afro-Americans; yet we must not be so awed by this that we conclude that Liebow and Hannerz had no business writing Tally's Corner and Soulside. Liebow admitted that some men in the neighborhood of "Tally's corner" remained suspicious of him because he was an outsider (1967, pp. 209-210), and Lincoln Keiser reported that the history of racial hatred kept a barrier between himself and the Vice Lords of Chicago, even though they considered him a friend (1970a, p. 229). But ethnographers in the field frequently encounter unremitting suspicion in an ethnic community which they enter as a total stranger. We can readily admit that the continued and expanded interest of black scholars is essential to the academic future of Afro-American studies as a viable area of scholarly teaching and research, but this realization should not lead us to conclude that whites cannot play an effective role in this future.

In speaking of "the doctrine of the insider," Robert Merton reminds us that "groups in conflict want to make their interpretation of how things are and were and will be become the prevailing interpretation," and this gives rise "to the familiar case of the converted outsider validating himself by becoming over-zealous in adhering to the doctrine of the

group with which he wants to identify himself, if only symbolically" (1970, p. 13). When white social scientists fall prey to this, they effectively neutralize their own knowledge. As practicing anthropologists, we should recognize that the doctrine of the insider, as expressed by some scholars in the field of black studies, is a reasonable but ethnocentric response to the equally ethnocentric stereotypes accepted for so long by the outsiders.

> "When a nation, race or ethnic group has long extolled its own merits and deprecated the qualities of others, it invites a counter-ethnocentrism. And when a once largely powerless minority acquires a socially validated sense of growing power, its members experience an intensified need for self-affirmation. Collective self-glorification, found in some measure among all groups, becomes a frequent counter-response to long-standing belittlement from without." (Merton, 1970, p. 12).

If anthropologists understand this social phenomenon, and many certainly do (for example, see LeVine, 1966), then they must pass on their knowledge to students rather than defer to the dogmatic claim that only blacks can teach courses about blacks. Regardless of our ethnic identity, as anthropologists and as teachers we have somthing to gain and something to offer in the area of Afro-American studies.

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